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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 001175

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SUBJECT: PM REACHES OUT TO ARRAY OF KASHMIRI LEADERS AS J&K
INCHES TOWARD NORMALCY

REF: NEW DELHI 804

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Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Mixed private reaction, ranging from support to suspicion, greeted the GOI announcement that PM Singh would, on February 24, bring together moderate Kashmiri separatists and J&K elected political leaders for a roundtable conference in New Delhi. The event appears designed by the PMO to expand the Delhi-Srinagar dialogue beyond the meetings the GOI has conducted with the Hurriyat and the People's Conference and the PM-Yasin Malik meeting planned for February 17. The Army also reports that increased interest among Kashmiri youth in enlisting, and the recent surrender of a dozen terrorists, indicate the state is inching toward normalcy. Terrorism analysts caution that new datapoints do not always indicate new trends, but these steps will factor in PM Singh's possible visit to Pakistan in June trip as part of a Sikh religious procession. Such overtures also show the GOI's steadfast desire to engage peaceful Kashmiris, and give the GOI a strong rebuttal to Pakistan's publicized pressure for a greater US role in Indo-Pak dialogue. This decision to widen the circle of participants also reflects the GOIs' deep disappointment with the Mirwaiz since his recent trip to Pakistan, where he echoed the GOP line on several key issues. End Summary.

PM Widening the Dialogue Process ...

¶2. (U) After weeks of isolated media barbs claiming the UPA government had stalled its outreach to moderate Kashmiri separatists, PM Singh has taken up the charge with renewed vigor. Pushing forward despite the kerfluffle over whether the PM had quietly met JKLF leader Yasin Malik last autumn (Reftel), the two are scheduled to parley on February 17; the JKLF will be the third moderate separatist element to meet the PM after the Mirwaiz Hurriyat last year and Sajjad Lone of the People's Conference in early January.

¶3. (U) The PM's heretofore incremental tactic of approaching one moderate separatist constituent group at a time is slated to move soon into second gear. J&K Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad announced on February 14 that the PM would invite both separatist groups and mainstream political parties to a February 24 roundtable conference in New Delhi. Azad reiterated that the dialogue process would be open only to groups that eschew violence. The political parties are being invited because they have broad electoral support, unlike the separatists, whose support is much more limited.

... To Mixed Kashmiri Reaction

¶4. (C) Our contacts in J&K yield a mixed assessment on the announcement of the roundtable. Continuing in his post-Pakistan trip dour mood, Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Omar Farooq grumbled that the GOI had invited "every Tom, Dick, and Harry" without first doing their homework; nonetheless, he told us he is coming to Delhi right away for consultations, and we will be sure to make contact with him. JKLF leader Yasin Malik told us he had received an invitation and would attend, in addition to his meeting with the PM on the 17th. The journalists we talked to -- Altaf Hussain of

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BBC/Srinagar and "Kashmir Images" editor Bashir Manzar -- were upbeat. Hussain called Azad's announcement a "significant development" and Manzar told us "there is no question of (separatist groups) not joining" the discussion. Our Hurriyat interlocutors, however, ranged from noncommittal -- unsurprising, since many of them undoubtedly heard of the proposal for the first time from news media -- to suspicious.

J&K National Front (a Hurriyat component) Chairman Naeem Khan said the Hurriyat would have to debate whether and how it would attend, while Hurriyat Executive Member (and Sajjad's estranged brother) Bilal Lone conspiratorially linked the offer to President Bush's forthcoming trip to India, called it "a dangerous ploy," and told us that his Hurriyat element, the People's Conference, "should not participate in such a roundtable ... we will think ten times before going to such a conference." (Bilal did, to his credit, support the planned PM-Malik meeting.) Parvez Imroze, President of the J&K Coalition of Civil Society, also relayed to us that many Kashmiris are suspicious regarding the announcement, and wonder how it fits with the PM's past and pending interactions with the Hurriyat, Sajjad Lone, and Yasin Malik. We expect pro-Pakistan hardliner SAS Geelani will publicly denounce the initiative once a journalist asks him. (COMMENT: It is unsurprising that the separatists are nervous. They had a "lock" on Kashmiri engagement with the PM that is now being given in part to mainstream parties such as Mehbooba Mufti's People's Democratic Party and Omar Abdullah's National Conference. END COMMENT.)

Army Says J&K Inching Toward Normalcy

¶5. (U) Srinagar-based XV Corps Chief of Staff Major General VK Singh told reporters on February 14 that an overwhelming response to the Army's recent recruitment rallies in the Valley demonstrates "changed times" in the troubled state. He said that over 10,000 Territorial Army applicants showed up for an early February recruiting rally in north Kashmir, and almost 18,000 sought billets at a February 13 Anantnag rally (where recruiters were able to screen less than 800 and

short-list only 10% of those). When asked for his assessment, Singh replied, "the youth want jobs, politics has taken a back seat."

¶16. (U) Another incident holds promise for better times in J&K. Following up on Army Chief General JJ Singh's strategy of offering both carrots and sticks to break the back of terrorist groups in the state, Major General Singh reported that a dozen terrorists from several groups were enticed by their families to surrender on February 13.

Pakistan: The Spoiler

¶17. (C) New Delhi terrorism expert Ajai Sahni cautioned, however, that isolated datapoints are insufficient to announce the end of trends that have persevered for nearly two decades. He holds to the assessment that only after "Musharraf gets what he wants, if he even knows what that is," will the GOP cease supporting cross-border terrorism. "They are simply too effective and too enmeshed in the policy calculus, and the various dialogues are progressing too slowly and too incrementally, for Islamabad to give them up," he predicted.

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Preparing the Ground for PM Visit to Pakistan?

¶18. (C) These pronouncements may be intended to prepare the ground for PM Singh to take up President Musharraf's April 2005 offer to visit Pakistan this summer. Nobody is publicly connecting these dots, but New Delhi correspondent for "DAWN" Jawed Naqvi on February 13 published a forward-leaning article saying that PM Singh is considering a visit to Pakistan in mid-June in conjunction with a Sikh religious procession from Amritsar to Gurdwara Dera Sahib in Lahore. The article was based, Naqvi later told us, on a single PMO source who claimed to be in the meeting at which the possible trip, on invitation from the Sikh Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC, which is organizing the procession), was discussed. The pieces are not yet in place: the SGPC told us that "talks are on" for the PM to attend (despite Naqvi's reporting that the SGPC President confirmed the planned visit), and the Pakistani High Commission "has had no official communication on the subject." The procession is scheduled from June 12-14, with another Sikh religious event on the June 16; although this is clearly not yet nailed down, this event is a convincing hook for a possible PM visit, much as cricket was Musharraf's hook for last year's Delhi visit.

Terrorism a Key Factor

¶19. (C) The decisive factor in the PM's decision will undoubtedly be his assessment of cross-border terrorism -- including the GOI's assessment of current trends and whether the PM believes a visit will help move things in the right direction. The GOI undoubtedly calculates that any successes stemming from the PM's Kashmir diplomacy would give Musharraf political cover to live up to his January 6, 2004 promise to prevent cross-border terrorism. It will also, intentionally or not, make the PM's trip (if it does materialize) more politically palatable to the Indian public.

GOI Eyeing POTUS Visit, Too

¶10. (C) This new Kashmir overture will also position the GOI well to address Kashmir if the issue arises during the President's visit to South Asia. By keeping the ball in the Kashmiris' court, the GOI ensures it cannot be blamed for a delay in the dialogue process, nor can it be accused of ignoring Kashmiri aspirations.

¶11. (C) The GOI has broadened the Kashmir dialogue in part because Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Omar Farooq's visit to Pakistan in January, and his constant echoing of Musharraf trial balloons on Kashmir, irritated the GOI mightily. Mirwaiz' behavior since his return, including fiery sermons at his Srinagar mosque, have further worried the GOI. The GOI was already frustrated that Mirwaiz had not shown sufficient seriousness in earlier rounds of dialogue with the PM; MHA Kashmir guru NN Vohra told us in December that Mirwaiz had refused a GOI offer to begin technical discussions in earnest, and had preferred to use the dialogue

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as a platform from which to attack India. Now, Mirwaiz's earlier special role has been greatly diluted, and the GOI is opening discussion to the full, fractured spectrum.

Comment: Smart Moves by India

¶12. (C) In the final analysis, this dialogue offer is a smart move by India, and shows that the PM's vision of peace remains steadfast. The GOI can appear to move the ball forward, putting Pakistan, Kashmiris, and other observers on the back foot. If the dialogue succeeds or gathers momentum, the GOI will look like geniuses; if it stalls or fails, they can claim to have undertaken every effort to forge a negotiated settlement in Kashmir. If separatists like the Mirwaiz fail to attend the dialogue, they will appear churlish, even as the talks go on. Ultimately, we doubt any dramatic breakthroughs will come out of any of this, but it is a rare smart tactical move by India, and will help further signal to the terrorists that their use of violence to pursue political goals leads to a dead end.

¶13. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)
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